

WikiNation: On Peace and Conflict in the Middle East

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WikiNation:

On Peace and Conflict in the Middle East

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Biography:

Gary Hall is Professor of Media and Performing Arts, Coventry University, UK. He is author of *Culture in Bits* (2002) and *Digitize This Book!* (2008), and co-editor of *New Cultural Studies* (2006) and *Experimenting: Essays With Samuel Weber* (2007). He is founding co-editor of the open access journal *Culture Machine* (<http://www.culturemachine.net>), editor of Berg's *Culture Machine* book series (Oxford), director of the cultural studies open access archive CSeARCH (<http://www.culturemachine.net/csearch>), and co-founder of the Open Humanities Press (<http://www.openhumanitiespress.org>). His work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Angelaki*, *Cultural Studies*, *Parallax*, *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, and *The Oxford Literary Review*.

Abstract:

This article begins by analysing critically the usefulness of the recent political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe for reconceptualising ideas of peace and conflict. It takes as its focus for doing so the situation of the Middle East. It proceeds to show how Mouffe's radical democratic politics is actually just another form of the liberalism of Habermas and Rawls she positions her theory against. The essay then explores the potential digital media hold for making affirmative, affective, hyper-political interventions in specific contents and singular situations. In particular, it advocates using the wiki medium - hence the piece's *Wikipedia*-like form - to experiment with new ways of organising institutions, cultures, communities and countries which do not uncritically repeat the reductive adherence to democracy, hegemony and Western, bourgeois, liberal humanism identified in Mouffe, but which can also be located in the institution of academic criticism more widely. 'WikiNation' is part of a series of 'performative media' projects. Performative media here stands for media that do not endeavour to represent the world so much as have an effect *in* or *on* it. They are media which produce the things of which they speak, in other words, and which are engaged primarily in and through their actual performance.

On peace and conflict

Those of us who write on cultural theory and cultural politics are frequently confronted by colleagues and students working in more empirically-oriented disciplines with challenges drawn from “real life.” Not surprisingly, one of the more regularly occurring of these in recent years has concerned the “war on terror,” the occupation of Iraq and the Israel/Palestine conflict. The following questions, differently phrased, are often posed: “How might the kind of analysis you have undertaken in your work - one which might be described as destabilizing the entrenched certainties of polar oppositions and endeavouring to develop an ethical response to the irreducible otherness of the other as well as to one's own alterity - help us to rethink ideas of peace and conflict? In particular, how it might do so in relation to a specific conflict-riven context?” This article is an attempt to develop the beginnings of one possible response to these frequently posed questions. It takes as its focus the Middle-East.

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The 6-step programme

The following is by now a tried and tested method for rethinking ideas of peace and conflict. It offers a simple yet effective treatment of the issues, using a set of 6 easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions:

The 6-Step Programme

Step 1 - show how any would-be unified self – be it an individual, a culture, a nation – can only establish and maintain its identity by distinguishing itself from and excluding that which it is *not*;

Step 2 - demonstrate that any such self cannot be positioned in terms of a simple conflict or oppositional relationship with those identified as being “outside” and “other” to it; for at the same time as it rejects and condemns those others, it also needs them and their difference to establish and maintain its own identity;

Step 3 - reveal that any such self depends upon and even contains many of the attributes it ascribes to its others;

Step 4 - show that it *is* just another form of what it accuses those others of being;

Step 5 - argue that, rather than attempting to “de-other” itself by eliminating whatever its others represent, the prospective self-identical entity needs to recognise that this relation represents an *internal* dislocation. (In other words, the idea is for it to stop imagining itself as constituting some kind of integral totality while at the same time continually fearing its own immanent dissolution at the hands of its “others”);

Step 6 - explain that, rather than representing a crisis or threat, this internally dislocated nature *is just what it is*: that any would-be unified self just *is* constitutively non-identical to itself; that this is what makes it possible (and of course impossible) in the first place.ⁱ

Can such an approach be adopted with regard to the situation of the Middle East in order to help us address issues of peace and conflict there? The hypothesis or proposition I want to develop in this essay is that, to a certain extent, this somewhat formulaic-looking method can indeed be useful when dealing with the political complexities of the Middle East - although not in quite so straightforward a manner as the above “6-step programme” may suggest.

But that is for later. At this point I want to move away from broad generalisations as, despite the impression perhaps created by my somewhat playful opening, I do not want to imply that analyses conducted along these “self/other” lines are all the same. Indeed, this particular project on peace and conflict in the Middle East is driven by an

ethical injunction to retain a relation of infinite responsibility to an unconditional hospitality, no matter whether we are dealing with political events or political texts.ⁱⁱ For this reason I am going to focus in this essay on a specific instance of such an analysis: that provided by the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe - who is one of the most interesting contemporary theorists of the relation between peace and conflict - in her recent books *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) and, especially, *On the Political* (2005).

On the political

In keeping with the approach sketched above, Mouffe views the political in terms of a conflict and antagonism that is irreducible. Reading the philosopher Carl Schmitt against himself, Mouffe argues that the political “‘can be understood only in the context of the friend/enemy grouping’” (Schmitt 1976: 35; cited in Mouffe 2005: 11). “By showing that every consensus is based on acts of exclusion, [Schmitt] reveals the impossibility of a fully inclusive ‘rational’ consensus” (Mouffe 2005: 11). This is because of what Mouffe, following Jacques Derrida, calls the “‘constitutive outside,’” whereby, when it comes to the “field of collective identities, we are always dealing with the creation of a ‘we’ which can exist only by the demarcation of a ‘they’” (2005: 15): the ethnic minority, the immigrant, the asylum seeker, the religious or political extremist, the terrorist and so on. From this point of view we can never achieve peace: not internally within a culture or society; nor externally between different cultures and societies. Instead, we need to acknowledge the antagonistic

dimension that is “constitutive of ‘the political’” (2005: 2) and give up on the fantasy of ever arriving at a completely united and harmonious world in which all power, violence and sovereignty is eradicated.

Now, it is important not to see the irreducibility of conflict as a purely negative thing, as it might be perceived, say, by liberal thought, which has as one of its central tenets “the rationalist belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason” (11). In fact, far from placing democracy at risk, a certain degree of confrontation constitutes the very possibility of its existence. As far as Mouffe is concerned, “a well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions” (30). It is thus far more dangerous *not* to acknowledge this irreducible antagonism, as this lack of acknowledgement leads to negative forms of conflict in the arenas of both domestic and international politics. Mouffe explains by referring to the various affective forces, which she calls “‘passions:’” i.e. those drives, desires and fantasies which make people want to become part of a crowd, group, community or nation and which form the basis of collective forms of identification. Unless these passions and the forms of conflict they give rise to have a legitimate democratic means of expressing themselves, there is a danger that a “confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values” will take their place, with all the attendant negative consequences (30). For Mouffe, “democratic institutions can contribute to [the] disarming of the libidinal forces leading towards hostility which are always present in human societies” by providing positive channels for their expression (26).

From political to moral

Mouffe's emphasis on the constitutive nature of political conflict leads her to argue strongly against the *post-political* vision of the world that has been attributed to sociologists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Revising ideas of the "post-industrial society" and the "end of ideology" from the 1960s, they argue that conceptions of politics built around shared, large-scale group identities have become irretrievably old-fashioned and outmoded. For Beck and Giddens, Western societies are currently experiencing a "'second modernity' in which individuals liberated from collective ties can now dedicate themselves to cultivating a diversity of lifestyles, unhindered by antiquated attachments," such as those associated with the ideological divisions of left and right (1). Liberal democracy has thus won out over communism, and consensus is held as being achievable now through dialogue rather than political conflict and antagonism.

According to Mouffe, however, what we are seeing at the moment is not the "disappearance of the political in its adversarial dimension... What is happening is that nowadays the political is played out in the *moral register*" (5). So, to provide a few examples of my own, after the events of 9/11, North Korea, Iran and Iraq were notoriously positioned by George W. Bush in terms of an "axis of evil" (Bush 2002); an axis which was soon expanded to include Cuba, Libya and Syria.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, in 2002, Cherie Blair, the human rights lawyer and wife of the then British Prime Minister, was made to apologise for saying that "as long as young people [in Palestine] feel they have got no hope but to blow themselves up you are never going to make

progress.”^{iv} She had to apologise for saying this because nowadays people in her position are expected to condemn actions such as suicide bombing as morally wrong and thus incomprehensible to all right-minded people. *What they are not expected to do* is interpret them as a political issue, and hence understandable, as Cherie Blair did. The problem with this moralistic approach, however, is that no dialogue or discussion is possible with anything that is “evil.” Evil – as is clearly the case with regard to Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, Saddam Hussein or Palestinian suicide bombers – just *has to be condemned and destroyed*. Yet not only does this playing out of the political in moral terms often lead those on the side of “good” to be just as violent as those they accuse of being morally wrong, it also results in that which is repressed returning in illegitimate, violent forms, since it has no legitimate outlet.

On the Middle East

Can an analysis such as that offered by Mouffe, and inspired by the philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Carl Schmitt, be adopted with regard to the Middle East, then? If conflict *is* constitutive of the political, surely one of the most interesting places to think about peace is somewhere in which the irreducibility of antagonism is extremely apparent. From this standpoint, rather than being a “backward region” not worth paying attention to because it is always locked in apparently unresolvable political turmoil – as a 2007 article in *Prospect* magazine indeed maintained (Luttwak 2007) – the fact that it is the scene of so much violence is precisely what makes the Middle East interesting and important when it comes to exploring how different people can

live together. Mouffe certainly raises a number of issues that are relevant to any understanding of peace and conflict in the region today.

Terrorism

For instance, we could use Mouffe's argument to interpret events such as the 7/7 bombings in London as the reactions of Islamic fundamentalists to the globalizing advance of Western, liberal democracy. From this perspective, terrorism is not simply the work of small-scale fanatical groups working in relative isolation. It is "the product of a new configuration of the political which is characteristic of the type of world order being implemented around the hegemony of a single hyper-power:" that of the US (Mouffe 2005: 81). In fact, as far as Mouffe is concerned, "the lack of political channels for challenging the hegemony of the neo-liberal model of globalization is... at the origin of the proliferation of discourses and practices of radical negation of the established order" (82), among which we could presumably include the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and all those events associated with the name al-Qaeda.

Hrant Dink

Could we develop a similar analysis with regard to the murder in Istanbul early in 2007 of the Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrant Dink? Dink argued for “democratization in Turkey and focused on the issues of free speech, minority rights, civic rights and issues pertaining to the Armenian community.”^v Was Dink killed because he was seen as being wrong in *moral* rather than *political* terms? Did the ultra-nationalist far right in Turkey perceive him as an evil enemy to be destroyed because they lack other channels for challenging the hegemony of the Western, liberal democratic model of globalization, channels that would have enabled them to see Dink instead as a *political* opponent?

The question of Europe (and cosmopolitanism)

Although Moufe does not of course mention either Bhutto or Dink (*The Democratic Paradox* and *On the Political* were published in 2000 and 2005 respectively), she nevertheless insists that it is a mistake to think neo-liberal globalisation can be best resisted on a nationalist or even national level. Instead, she argues for the creation of a strong political Europe, at least to counter the US and “oppose the violations of international law and human rights by the [then] Bush government” (2005: 129). But she is careful to emphasise that this should not be regarded as merely the first stage in the creation of a cosmopolitan world order based on the universalization of the European liberal democratic worldview: one which presents the latter as “the only just and legitimate regime, whose institutions would, in idealized conditions, be chosen by all rational individuals” (83); and anyone who does not choose it – those associated

with Islam, for instance - as irrational, uncivilised or morally and culturally backward. Too often the choice nations outside the West are faced with – especially when it comes to joining organisations such as the European Union - is that they can retain their traditional cultures, religions, and ways of life but then *not* take part in the economic modernization and prosperity associated with the West. Or they can join in with this so-called progressive modernization and reformation on the economic level, but then also have their traditional cultures, religions and ways of life transformed into a liberal, democratic, individualistic order. Consequently, rather than advocate cosmopolitanism, Mouffe argues for a multipolar world, with ideas, decisions and critiques being generated in a plurality of places: not just America or Europe but many different centres of power. One can easily imagine such centres or poles including the Middle East as well as South America (under the influence of Hugo Chavez perhaps?), China, East Asia, India...

On the anti-political

Mouffe's analysis is no doubt useful with regard to some of the issues related to peace and conflict we might want to think about here. In particular, it enables us to understand that conflict in the Middle East is not natural, timeless and without foreseeable end; that the region cannot be positioned as a state of exception, "an included exclusion," the role of which is to "preserve the conceptual and geographical borders, and thus the vitality, of the democratic *polis*" of the West (Zylinska 2009). The Middle East can only be viewed in this manner if history and politics (and indeed

biopolitics) are excluded from our reading of the situation. Instead, with Mouffe, we can see that conflict and antagonism are everywhere constitutive of the political and that they form an irreducible aspect of it. The point then is not to search for the complete resolution of all conflict and the associated reconciliation between the different conflicting parties (as that is impossible); nor to despair at and give up on those who fail to achieve this goal (it is impossible, after all); but rather to find more constructive ways of expressing such antagonism.

Yet, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, adopting an approach of this kind is *not* what I want to suggest we do: partly for reasons that are specific to Mouffe's analysis; but also for reasons that are applicable to this kind of theoretical approach more widely. The reasons that are specific to Mouffe concern the way in which her theory, for me, is *not* political. I would even go so far as to say it is *anti-political*.

Antagonism vs. agonism

The anti-political nature of her theory is apparent from her attempt to tame and domesticate the conflict and violence which, following Schmitt, she regards as inherent to the political. For Mouffe, the main question of democratic politics is not how to eliminate issues to do with power and conflict so that we end up in a state of perpetual peace, Kantian or otherwise. The question is rather: how can power and conflict assume a form that is compatible with democratic values? As far as she is concerned, a pluralist democracy can achieve this only through the establishment of a

set of institutions and practices by which domination and violence “can be limited and contested” (Mouffe 2000: 22). To this end Mouffe identifies two different forms in which antagonism can emerge: antagonism and what she calls agonism. “While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are “adversaries’ not enemies,” she explains (2005: 20). We can now begin to think the problem of democratic politics somewhat differently, for from the viewpoint of “agonistic pluralism,” the goal of democratic politics is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism*. In this way, Mouffe is able to produce an account of society that acknowledges the irreducibility of conflict and violence, but not to such an extent that it destroys any democratic political association.

My concern, however, is that this leads her to offer a consensual vision of society that is almost as free from political conflict as that of the liberals she positions her theory against. For Mouffe is still drawing a line between those with whom “we have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy,” and those with whom we do not (2000: 102); between those we disagree with, but can nevertheless treat as legitimate opponents and so include within the democratic political association, and those we cannot treat as legitimate and who therefore remain enemies to be excluded.

To argue that Mouffe is adopting the same strategy she criticises others for employing on the grounds that (1) it is impossible; (2) it denies the pluralism she regards as

constitutive of modern liberal democracy; (3) it implies the eradication of the political which has to do precisely with conflict and antagonism, would be to get a little ahead of ourselves, however. Mouffe's political philosophy is not necessarily inconsistent on this point. For one thing, a certain amount of pluralism and conflict is still possible here: it has just been transformed from antagonism (which is illegitimate) into agonism (which is legitimate). For another, Mouffe has no problem with placing limits on pluralism or with the exclusion of what she considers to be illegitimate forms of politics – just so long as it is clear that this is a *political* decision, not an expression of a “universal morality” (2005: 121). In marked contrast to the liberalism of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, then, Mouffe *does* appear to be providing the basis for including the kind of conflict and pluralism over politics that might otherwise be considered to be eliminated from her philosophy. Witness the way she emphasises that “the drawing of the frontier between the legitimate and the illegitimate is always a political decision, and that it should therefore always remain open to contestation” (121). From this perspective, Mouffe has made a *political decision* in favour of the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy and against those who think differently enough to want to challenge these principles. She stresses, however, that, being *political*, this decision is an inherently violent one that always remains open to political conflict and contestation.

My question is *does it*? For all that Mouffe emphasises the importance of making a *political decision*, it seems to me that some things are more open to contestation than others, and that a number of the decisions she makes actually do not remain open to challenge at all. Let me draw attention to what I consider to be three of the most

important of these: important, not just for Mouffe's philosophy, but for the kind of analysis we might develop regarding peace and conflict.

The others of democracy

To begin with, let us consider Mouffe's notion that other forms of sociality do not permit the kind of legitimization of conflict she ascribes to democracy. The reason Mouffe makes a *political decision* in favour of liberal democracy is because she regards the latter, for all its problems, as preferable to other forms of social organisation, such as fascism, totalitarianism, religious fundamentalism and so on, due to the fact that democracy recognises and permits a degree of antagonism. "What is specific and valuable about modern liberal democracy," she writes, "is that... it creates a space in which... confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final" (2000: 15). Still, while it may be true that democracy *does* allow for conflict, and certain other forms of sociality including those associated with totalitarianism, fascism and religious fundamentalism do not, is that to say *all* other possible forms of sociality do not? Is this something that has been thoroughly and rigorously analysed and investigated? Or has it just been adopted nowadays as something of a philosophical and political truism? Is this decision on Mouffe's part not based on precisely the kind of stereotypes - about democracy (that it does allow for political contestation), about other forms of sociality (that they do not), and about other forms of (non-democratic) conflict - that have been

used by some to justify the universalization of democracy as the “modern,”
“progressive” way to go?

Democracy

The second of Mouffe’s uncontested decisions concerns democracy itself. For Mouffe, there can be conflict within democracy over the way “the institutions constitutive of the democratic political association” are to be interpreted, but not over the continuing existence of those democratic institutions in some shape or form. In other words, the nature of those institutions can be contested; what cannot be contested is the shared symbolic space - i.e. democracy - that is necessary for that contestation to take place. The democratic system cannot be replaced by a communist one, for example.

Something similar happens on the international plane. Here “different vernacular models of democracy” from that of the Western liberal version are perfectly acceptable, and are even to be encouraged (2005: 129). Yet for all her talk of the dangers of the universalization of the Western or European cosmopolitan world-view, and of the need for the development of a multipolar world to counter this, Mouffe is still quite happy to universalize democracy, as these all have to be models of democracy of some kind. While the nature of particular *forms* of democracy can be challenged, then - which means Islamic countries, say, do not necessarily *have* to adopt the Western liberal model - what cannot be challenged is democracy itself.

I should just stress, I am saying this *not* because I suffer from what has been described as a “hatred of democracy” (Rancière 2006). I am not maintaining that a political decision *cannot* be taken to the effect that democracy is the best - or at any rate least worst - system to adopt in a given situation. (I can appreciate that democracy must be particularly attractive in circumstances such as those experienced in Turkey recently – to provide just one example relating to the Middle East - when the military again, as they have so many times before, threatened to get involved in the running of civil society.)^{vi} What it is to say is that, if the political for Mouffe is a decision taken in an undecidable terrain, which it is, then such a political decision is not available to be taken in her work, not regarding democracy anyway (2000: 130).

Hegemony

This brings me to the third of Mouffe’s unchallengeable decisions: that politics is always hegemonic. Quite simply, for her “there is no ‘beyond hegemony’” (2005: 118). “Every order is *by necessity* a hegemonic order” (106).

Now I would agree that political antagonism is “ineradicable” - to the extent that we should not be searching for complete reconciliation between the various conflicting parties in the Middle East. But does that mean politics *always* takes a hegemonic form? After all, hegemony is not universal: it is a *specific* form of politics.^{vii} What is more, I would maintain this is the case with respect to both of the main senses in

which hegemony is usually understood. It is the case in the sense in which hegemony refers to the leadership or dominance of one class or group over another: not every political struggle is necessarily a struggle for this kind of leadership or dominance. But it is also the case with regard to the understanding of hegemony as a generalised political logic. From this perspective, a society can only institute itself by virtue of its relation to that which exists outside and in excess of it. As a consequence, its identity is constitutively marked by non-closure: it can never achieve absolute unity and stability. It is here that the theory of hegemony understood as a generalised political logic comes into play. For although this instability can never be entirely overcome, hegemony consists of the attempt to provide social relations with a temporary degree of closure, stability, unity and meaning by way of an act of articulation of this excess of the social. (Which is how a “‘we’ that can exist only by the demarcation of a ‘they’” is established and maintained.) This is why every social order is hegemonic in nature, for Mouffe; why there is no going beyond hegemony: because “power relations are constitutive of the social” (2005: 106). So even a socialist or communist society would not be free of hegemony in this sense. It is also why the political, for Mouffe, is a decision taken in an undecidable terrain: because such social relations are not fixed or natural, the result of objective and immutable economic or historical processes and practices. Instead, they are the product of continual, precarious, hegemonic politico-economic articulations: i.e. of contingent, pragmatic yet temporary decisions involving power, conflict and violence. The latter of course brings with it the advantage that there is the potential for these articulations to be “disarticulated and transformed” as a result of struggle between the agonistic adversaries and a new form of hegemony established (33). But can politics really only be thought in terms of a universal drive for unified identity, however unrealisable it

ultimately may be? Must all politics inevitably be about instituting the social field?

Are there not other ways of being political which do not require hegemonic articulation?

Interestingly, Mouffe positions her 1985 book co-written with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, as having acknowledged “that politics is now taking place in a multiplicity of domains hitherto considered as non-political” (2005: 53). Similarly in *On the Political* she maintains that the striated nature of the “globalized space,” in which there are a multiplicity of “sites where relations of power are articulated in specific local, regional and national configurations,” means that what is required is a “variety of strategies” and resistances (2005: 114). Mouffe is thus clearly in favour of “enlarging the domain of politics” (53). Just not so much to be capable – even potentially - of making a political decision in favour of struggles which cannot be apprehended through the category of hegemony, it seems. All these different resistances still need to be organised into a “chain of equivalence,” with a view to constructing a new hegemony (53).

Mouffe as an anti-political liberal (and not all that pluralistic either)...

The above statement regarding hegemony does not mean I agree with Beck and Giddens that we *have* entered a “post-political” era; that I consider viewing politics in terms of hegemony to be completely out of date; or that, as far as I am concerned, we are now living in a post-hegemonic world. Again, I am not maintaining that a

responsible decision *cannot* ever be taken to the effect that hegemony *is* an appropriate concept to use when attempting to understand, analyse and resist a particular situation; nor that we should never attempt to create a chain of equivalence among political struggles. Far from it. I am just drawing attention to the fact that Mouffe has a transcendentalized and fetishized notion of hegemonic politics which is in her own terms universally moralizing and anti-political, as she does not appear to be willing to make an actual political decision about any of this. Not one that remains open both to contestation and to the actual complexities of a given social or cultural situation: to the incalculable, the other, *the undecidable*, and especially to the possibility that politics may not always appear as she presents it. As a result, I would argue that Mouffe's theory of politics is *not political* even according to her own criteria. What is more, *it is not all that pluralistic either*, since she is clearly leaving little room here for political positions that conflict with her own.

In fact the whole thrust of Mouffe's politics is to establish a democratic society that will allow for agonism, but not "*antagonism properly speaking*." As I explained above, she can only do this, firstly, by distinguishing between antagonism and agonism; and then, secondly, by excluding or marginalizing antagonism - that which she cannot tame or transform into agonism, and which therefore *really* is conflicting with her own values - outside this (radical) democratic realm. Of course, aware that there is a danger here of excluding political confrontation and conflict to a constitutive outside of her own making in an attempt to eradicate it from democratic society and thereby maintain a degree of relative peacefulness and reconciliation, Mouffe stresses, as we have seen, that "the drawing of the frontier between the legitimate and the illegitimate is always a political decision, and that it should therefore always remain open to

contestation” (2005: 121). However, as we have also seen, the decision as to what forms of conflict to consider legitimate and therefore include in democratic society and what to consider illegitimate and therefore exclude is in actual fact *not* always kept open to conflict and contestation by Mouffe. On the contrary, this decision is foreclosed, certainly when it comes to democracy and hegemony. Like the liberals she criticizes, Mouffe too, it seems, cannot envisage political conflict, antagonism and pluralism *within* democratic society. Ironically, Mouffe’s political philosophy thus turns out to be another form of the liberalism she positions her theory against.

... Western, American and bourgeois

This brings me to the more general reasons I want to suggest we *do not* simply adopt an analysis along these “self/other,” “we/they” lines. For, put very briefly, Mouffe’s adherence to the 6-step programme I outlined at the beginning of this essay means her political philosophy is all too easily incorporated into those “modernist,” “liberal” and “American” ways of thinking Timothy Clark has recently identified as being built into the institution of academic criticism. As Clark shows, the problem with these ways of thinking, for all that they are more or less ubiquitous in literary and cultural theory, is that they tend to be:

- a. Reductive - in that they have at their foundation one unacknowledged but “all-determining norm:” that there is a natural desire for a certain kind of identity, “one whose self-realisation” is aggressive “assertion against others” (Clark 2005: 22).

We can clearly see this in Mouffe and her reliance on the notion of the “constitutive outside” (2005: 15).

- b. Insufficiently critical - for example, the assumption that there is a universal drive for unified identity is never interrogated. So while Mouffe may part company with Schmitt on his notion that “there is no place for pluralism inside a democratic political community,” and that democracy instead “requires existence of a homogenous *demos*” (2005: 14), she nevertheless adheres and leaves unquestioned his notion that political identities consist and emerge out of the we/they relation.
- c. Liberal - underpinned as they are by notions of sovereign, unified identity and subjectivity, such apparently “radical” critical projects therefore effectively reiterate the very terms of the bourgeois, liberal, humanist discourse they are attempting to place in question.

Performative media

On historical movements, moments, eras, trends and turns

Having said all that, I am not advocating we should now turn our backs on that tradition of thought which has concerned itself with the study of various attempts to establish identity through aggressive self-assertion against others. It is a tradition which, for me, *has* been, and very much continues to be, incredibly interesting and important. So none of this is about dividing the history of thought into historical movements, moments, trends or turns: from hegemony to post-hegemony; culture to complexity; ideology to affect; representation to flows; or language and textuality to science and materiality. Nor is it about, say, Bergson, Badiou, Deleuze and Latour somehow superseding Heidegger, Barthes, Derrida and Lacan. We need to be more generous, hospitable, rigorous and responsible than that. My argument concerns more the manner in which this tradition – which includes not just Mouffe and Heidegger *et al*, but also Agamben, Spivak, Bhabha, Said, Foucault, Fanon and Sartre, stretching at least as far back as Freud and Hegel - has often been taken up: the way analyses of this kind have become something of a programme (which is of course what I was trying to draw attention to with my “6-step” opening), and in the process *have* been too easily incorporated into uncritical, reductive, liberal and American ways of thinking, closing “off the force of debate and contestation,” and severely reducing the complexity that is intrinsic to situations such as that of the Middle East and indeed Europe (Clark 2005: 27).

Thinking Schmitt against Schmitt, Mouffe against Mouffe

For instance, it is not hard to understand why Mouffe has to foreclose the decisions I detailed above. If she did not, the antagonistic values she tries to exclude would threaten to bring into question the very concepts of democracy and hegemony she is anxious to defend. Nevertheless, what for me is so interesting about Mouffe's philosophy is how at the same time it also shows us that "bringing a deliberation to a close always results from a decision which excludes other possibilities and for which one should never refuse to bear responsibility by invoking the commands of general rules or principles" (2000: 105) – a state of affairs which would presumably include her own general principles regarding agonistic pluralism, liberal democracy, and hegemony. Instead, such a political decision has to be taken in relation to "specific practices" in "particular contexts" (2005: 121). It is also one that has to remain open to political conflict and contestation.

From this point of view, the question Mouffe's work pushes us to ask – even if she is not willing or able to raise it herself - is that, if we *really* want to be political, do we not have to take the risk of remaining open to those who *are* different, those with whom we *do not* "have a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy," and whom we *cannot* necessarily treat as legitimate political adversaries? We cannot decide against them always and forever, by invoking general rules or principles in advance:

- a. because that would not be to take a decision in an undecidable terrain, and so would not be political;
- b. because a specific practice or particular context may arise where we need to take a decision in favour of such different politics and antagonistic "enemies."

To be sure, doing so might risk challenging many of our own strongly held ideas – including those of democracy, *and* of hegemony. But what Mouffe shows – and I am thinking *with* Mouffe *against* Mouffe here, just as she thinks Schmitt against Schmitt – is that this is precisely the point. If the political *is* a decision taken in an undecidable terrain, then it *must* involve remaining open to the possibility of bringing even our ideas of democracy and hegemony into question.

Creating, inventing, experimenting

What this means is that, in order to be political, we need to be committed to both politics *and* what I elsewhere call – partly following Mouffe in doing so – *hyperpolitics* (Hall 2008b). The latter names, for me, a refusal to consider the question of politics as closed or decided in advance, and an associated willingness to open up an unconditional space for thinking about politics and the political beyond the way in which they have been traditionally conceived – a thinking of politics which is *more than politics*, while still being political. This in turn means not *just producing yet another analysis or critique* of the politics of others. Of course we have to do this, since without rigorous analysis we risk uncritically repeating the adherence to democracy and hegemony and bourgeois liberal humanism I have identified in Mouffe, and which can be located in academic criticism more widely. So we can not just shift the balance *away* from critique and *onto* “affirmative” methods (Massumi 2002: 17). (Which is why I have spent so long carefully working through Mouffe’s

political philosophy here.) But along with critique we *also* have to be prepared to go *beyond* what can be discerned and predicted by means of analysis. For we can now see that what it means to be political is not something that can, on the basis of either my own philosophy, or that of others, be decided once and for all *a priori* by means of analysis. Politics is not merely about the kind of intended consequences and affects that can be predicted, foreseen and articulated in advance. Politics is *also* something that has to be invented and created in relation to specific practices, in particular situations and contexts, by performing the associated decisions, and otherwise doing things that may be unanticipated and unpredictable, and thus *beyond* analysis.

country x

It is opportunities for doing this - for making affirmative, performative, affective political interventions by using media, both “old” and “new,” but especially “new,” to create singular situations in which people are required to take responsible political decisions - that I have been experimenting with in recent years in my own work. Examples include country x, which was a short-lived creative collaboration between the musician Matthew Herbert, Robert Smith and myself. We took our cue for country x from the way in which, by their “nation building” in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush and Blair showed what many philosophers and political theorists have argued for a long time now: that nations are not fixed or natural, but *can be constructed and invented*. So in 2006 we devised a project to explore the possibility of creating a new concept for a country, one which owed its heterogeneous emergence to a widespread

dissatisfaction with the politics, policies, borders and conflicts of the existing nation states. For example, while country x did not have an identity based on a particular geographical location or common history, what it did have was an unlimited immigration and emigration policy. We made a decision that anyone, anywhere, could become a citizen of country x irrespective of gender, religion, race, ethnicity, age, health, family history, social background, education, income, credit rating, employment status...^{viii}

Hyper-Cyprus

Could *we* do something similar with regard to the Middle East? Could *we* use some of what I have said about peace and conflict *to do more than just generate still further analyses and critiques* of the relationships between East and West, Islam and Christianity, Arab and Jew, religious and secular, traditional and modern, past and present? Could we also begin to work co-operatively and affirmatively to invent ways of organising institutions, cultures, communities, countries, in all their complexity, uncertainty and multiplicity, which do not just repeat the anti-political reductionism, lack of criticality and Western, bourgeois, liberal humanism we have seen to be a feature of other accounts of the relation between self and other? What if we were to devise our own community or country as a way of creating an actual, affective point of potentiality and transformation - not least in order to counter (in however minor a fashion) the hyper-power of Western liberal democracy?

A Hyper-Cyprus, if you like!

Why Cyprus rather than anywhere else? For one thing, the Middle East is not all the same. And while the situation of the multicultural but divided island of Cyprus is a singular one for many reasons, it is nevertheless a particularly interesting and appropriate place from which to address issues of this kind, given Cyprus has formed a part, sometimes an extremely important part, of so many Empires - Greek, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, British - all of which have left their traces to produce a multiple, hybrid culture.^{ix} Divided – very literally, physically and visibly - between North and South, could we not say that Cyprus occupies a strategic place, geopolitically and otherwise, not just between Turkey and Greece, but also between Asia and Europe, East and West, not to mention the Islamic and Christian, religious and secular worlds? Although there are of course others, including Israel/Palestine, or the city of Istanbul, which for many is located on a similar frontier or fault-line, would Cyprus not be a *particularly suitable* place from which to begin to address issues of this kind?

Wikimedia

To make it possible for us to *begin* experimenting along these lines I have set up a wiki. It is available at:

<http://hyper-cyprus.pbwiki.com>

This wiki consists of material any visitor to the site is free to add to, edit, delete, and creatively remix, reconstruct and reinvent however they see fit. (Basically, it works more or less like *Wikipedia* (www.wikipedia.org), except it is designed as a way to experiment with generating different notions of culture, community, the nation, etc. rather than as a free encyclopaedia).

It is important that we should use digital media in our efforts to think the political otherwise, I think. In his book *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson showed how modes of communication are central to ideas of the nation, and how writing in particular was central to the formation of the *modern* nation. But if that mode of communication begins to change - from writing on paper to the use of digital technology, say - does this not offer us a chance to raise some important questions regarding how the modern nation is conceived, and to begin to think the nation differently, and reimagine and reinvent it?

It is also important that, within this, we should use the wiki medium of communication specifically. For this particular medium enables us to experiment with ideas that are:

- “User-generated” – so everyone with access to the internet and a personal computer will be able to contribute to this “nation” and directly participate in its organisation and running.
- Distributed in structure – its use of “open editing” and “free content” means that this Hyper-Cyprus or WikiNation will have no *one* point of authorial or editorial control.

- Not limited by geographical, cultural or national boundaries – instead this WikiNation will have the potential to be inter- and trans-nationally inclusive, even global in scope if we wish.
- Continually in process – identity here will not be a given. It will not be fixed and unified (as if that was ever possible). This “community” or “country” or “collectivity” will rather be a (per)formative practice, something that is created and formed. It will thus be very visibly unstable, fluid, emergent; constantly in the making and in the process of becoming-other.
- Highly responsive – this WikiNation will be able to respond quickly to citizens’/users’ demands: for new features, institutions, philosophies and so forth.

As such, the wiki medium of communication can perhaps help us avoid simply repeating the Western, liberal models of culture, community, the nation and indeed academic work and the institution of academic criticism. It can do so by virtue of the way in which the project’s wikimedia form means that this community will not be:

- a. Simply made up of the contributions of autonomous, unified, sovereign, individualistic (neo)liberal subjects. Admittedly, this emphasis on my part on the wikimedia medium of communication *could* be taken as an attempt merely to be in tune with the current zeitgeist. However, whereas a lot of “Web 2.0” such as the social networking of MySpace and Facebook is very humanist and individualistic (and some would say neoliberal) (Kleiner & Wyrick 2007; Hodgkinson 2008), even in its very relational connectedness, wikis often tend to be the product of groups or networks of people it is difficult to give a fixed or unified identity to, but who are nevertheless working co-operatively, collaboratively and frequently

anonymously (to the user at least) to produce hard-to-recreate resources for free.

This is what, to my mind, is so interesting about the wiki medium specifically. As the example of *Wikipedia* illustrates, by harnessing collective intelligence and “the power of the crowd” – what is sometimes called “crowdsourcing” or in an academic context ‘social scholarship’ – the wiki medium has at least the *potential* to develop different models of social organisation, certainly to that of neo-liberal global capitalism; models which offer ways of thinking individuality *and* collectivity, singularity *and* commonality *together*.

- b. Owned and controlled by a limited number of authors, editors, publishers or institutions. Instead, “producers” are creating the basic idea and framework and then gifting it to everyone else, on the basis of the principles of open access and free content, to build upon and develop.
- c. Finished or even finishable – rather this “nation” will be constantly edited, added to, up-dated, revised, re-worked. Along with b. (above), this will assist us in keeping it open to continual political difference, conflict and contestation.
- d. Single, centralised or unified – instead its networked, distributed structure means anyone, anywhere, can potentially join in, publish and participate. It therefore has the capacity to be extremely pluralistic. We could even have a multi-locational, multi-polar institution, community or country, if we wish.

In view of the above I do not want to be prescriptive and establish a set of rules, norms, principles or procedures for any such new community. I do not even want to designate what we should call it. I have provisionally referred to it here as “Hyper-Cyprus” or “WikiNation,” but we can think of myriad other names.^x Perhaps we would not want it to assume the conventional form of a nation or country, with all that implies (i.e. that it is confined to a particular national territory, geographical location, social demographic, common identity, history, language, race, ethnicity, religion, ancestry or system of beliefs). That would possibly be too limiting; would involve replicating many features and attributes associated with the “nation” that we might otherwise want to place in question; and would besides risk restricting any such potential community primarily to those with a specific interest in that territory or location and so forth: i.e. Cyprus, the Middle East, Europe, the West. (In the case of Cyprus, in particular, there might also be a danger of it degenerating into the sort of polarised exchanges that have characterised discussions of the “Cyprus problem” elsewhere on the web.)

One thing that *is* certain about any such emergent community is that it is not something I *can simply tell you about in this essay and show you how it works*. It is something that has be invented and created; and by more people than just one single author. However, just to get the experiment started, I have placed in the wiki an initial proposal – in the form of a mission statement - for a new kind of university that could perhaps be part of any reconceived “nation.” (Everyone is free to add to, edit, delete,

distribute and mash-up this text however they wish, too.)^{xi} I wanted to begin with a mission statement for the university partly because of the central role the university plays in global capitalism's knowledge economy;^{xii} and partly to show that I am not advocating any kind of libertarianism. (We do need institutions, or even states, which is perhaps another reason for starting from a specific situation and context such as that of Cyprus.) But also because the university is a place where most people who raise questions like those with which I began - and who are therefore likely to read this response on my part - work or study. It therefore seemed to me to be an appropriate place, strategically, to try to begin affirmatively reimagining our ideas of politics and the political – and with them of peace and conflict.

Notes

ⁱ For one analysis along these lines, see Hall (2008a).

ⁱⁱ For more, see Hall (2008b).

ⁱⁱⁱ See "US Expands "Axis of Evil." *BBC News*, 6 May, 2002, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1971852.stm> (accessed 12 April, 2007).

^{iv} See "PM's Wife 'Sorry' in Suicide Bomb Row," *BBC News: World Edition*, 18 June, 2002, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/2051372.stm (accessed 12 April, 2007).

^v See "Hrant Dink," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hrant_Dink (accessed 30 March, 2007).

^{vi} I am not going to detail them here, but for a succinct English language journalistic account of these events, see “The Battle for Turkey’s Soul,” *The Economist*, 5 May, 2007: 9.

^{vii} See Grossberg, (2005, 357); Hall (2008b), especially chapter 4: ‘Anti-politics and the Internet’.

^{viii} While the initial country x was relatively short-lived, the experiment was reactivated by Matthew Herbert in 2008. Country x is available at http://www.countryx.org/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page (accessed 19 May, 2008).

^{ix} A powerful visual mapping of the history of empires in the Middle East is available at <http://www.mapsofwar.com/ind/imperial-history.html> (accessed 24 June, 2007).

^x I am aware that there are already one or two projects in various states of development operating under the latter name on the web. However, they are invariably attempts to reproduce Western, liberal models of democracy, albeit by overcoming perceived problems in its already existing forms.

^{xi} I have also placed an earlier, wikified version of this text in there, subject to the same free content conditions.

This is one of the reasons I have given this essay something of the form of a *Wikipedia* entry, replete with an opening list of contents.

^{xii} This is no doubt one explanation as to why there are a lot of emergent projects at the moment experimenting with new media to rethink the university. These include the edu-factory collective (available www.edu-factory.org, accessed 1 November, 2007); the Experimental University (see “From Knowledge of Self-Management to the Self-Management of Knowledge,” translated by Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastian Cobarrubias, available <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/catedraexperimental/en/print>, accessed 1 November, 2007); the Network for Self-Education (available http://p2pfoundation.net/Network_for_Self-Education, accessed 1 November, 2007); and Uniriot (available www.uniriot.org). For more see the Publiversity blog (available <http://publiversity.wordpress.com>, accessed 30 November, 2007). This contains an extensive list of experiments with new ways of conceptualizing the university as an institution.

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